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*NEW TESTAMENT ESCHATOLOGY AND
NEW TESTAMENT ETHICS*

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The most important contribution of this generation to Biblical interpretation has been made, beyond question, through the appreciation and analysis of New Testament eschatology. Round the teaching of the Gospels, like an atmosphere which even though unconscious of it they breathe, lies, according to this view, a circle of apocalyptic expectation, with its literature, its vocabulary, and its inextinguishable hopes. Though Rabbinical orthodoxy might regard this literature as heretical, it may well have had a peculiar fascination for contemplative or poetic minds. When, therefore, after solitary reflection on his mission, Jesus came into Galilee 'preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God,' it might be anticipated that he, like John the Baptist, would apply to that kingdom the language of apocalyptic hope, and would announce its approach as heralded by a catastrophic end of the world-age. This key of interpretation, once in the hands of German learning, has been applied with extraordinary ingenuity to many obscurities and perplexities of the Gospels, and has unlocked some of them with dramatic success. The strange phenomenon, for example, of reserve and privacy in the teaching of Jesus, becomes, in this view, an evidence of his esoteric consciousness of Messiahship, which none but a chosen few were permitted to know. 'He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.' The cardinal phrases of the teaching, 'Kingdom of Heaven,' 'Son of God,' and 'Son of Man,' all point, it is urged, not to a normal, human or social regeneration, but to a supernatural, revolutionary, and catastrophic change. The heart of the gospel is thus disclosed in its mysterious predictive passages: In those days, after that tribulation, they shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory; I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven; and the same note is

struck in the Epistles: Brethren, the time is short; the fashion of this world passeth away. "As a marine plant," remarks a vigorous exponent of this view, "blooms in water, but torn from its home becomes faded and unrecognizable, so the historical Jesus fades when torn from its place in eschatology."¹ Jesus, under this conception, is not so much teacher as prophet; with his gaze fixed, not on the conduct of life in the present world, but on the preparation of life for another world. "How could Jesus, the teacher," asks Schweitzer, in discussing the withdrawal to the North, "at such a moment desert a people so eager for teaching and help? [Such conduct] raises a doubt whether he felt himself to be in fact a teacher. . . . Even the announcement of his mission is not that of a teacher, for his parables were, it is written, designed not to reveal, but to conceal, and of the Kingdom of God he spoke only in parables."² "His ideal," an English advocate of the same view has lately said, "was not a human ideal, but a heavenly ideal. He did not wish to give men something to live by, but something wherewith to face the day of the Son of Man."³ In restrained, yet not unsympathetic, language, Professor Sanday calls attention to the significance of this tendency in criticism: "I doubt if we have realized how far the centre of gravity of our Lord's teaching lay beyond the grave. . . . I doubt if we have realized to what an extent he speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven as essentially future and essentially supernatural. . . . I doubt if we have appreciated the preliminary and preparatory character of his mission."⁴

Now it cannot be doubted that we have in this view an interpretative principle of the first importance. Its far-reaching effect upon critical study can be compared with nothing less than the epoch-making influence of Baur. Once in a century, it would seem, the pillars of New Testament history have to be tested, so that, as the Epistle to the Hebrews says, the removing of those things that are shaken may prove that those things which cannot

¹ A. Schweitzer, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*, 1906, p. 399.

² Mark 4 10-12 34; *op. cit.*, p. 350.

³ H. M. Garrod, *The Religion of All Good Men*, 1906, p. 71.

⁴ *The Life of Christ in Recent Research*, 1907, p. 121.

be shaken shall remain. Yet, as it soon appeared that the *Tendenz* theory was destined to receive important qualifications, so that it must now be prized rather as a starting-point than as a conclusion in New Testament criticism, so it may be that eschatology must be submitted to many further tests before it can be trusted to support the whole structure of the gospel. That much of the New Testament language is colored by the apocalyptic anticipation, that the shadow of an imminent catastrophe passes, like a cloud across a landscape, over the Master's teaching, so that his mission receives what Professor Sanday has suggestively called an 'occultation'⁵—all this is not only so probable in the historical setting of the Gospels, but becomes so clarifying an element in their interpretation, that it is likely to remain a permanent factor in critical research. But to say this is to say much less than the consistent eschatologist affirms. To him this occultation was a lifelong eclipse; the Gospels become a kind of drama in which Jesus disguises until the last scene his predetermined purpose; and the narrative is, in effect, the story of a colossal illusion, which Christian theology, by every device of spiritualized interpretation, has endeavored to correct. "The Jesus of Nazareth," it is concluded, "who appeared as Messiah, taught the ethics of the kingdom, and died to consecrate his work, never lived. He is a figure sketched by rationalism, called to life by liberalism, and supplied by modern theology with the clothing of historical science." "The entire history of Christendom down to the present day rests on the delay and non-arrival of the Second Coming, on the surrender of eschatology, and the accompanying and self-developing deliverance of religion from the eschatological idea."⁶

Such an interpretation of history invites consideration from many points of view, and may be examined with advantage even by those who are not New Testament critics. One may, for example, approach the subject with the modest equipment of a teacher of ethics, and ask himself what was likely to be the ethical teaching which would naturally issue from this condition of exalted and confident expectation. It has been said that "it is necessary in interpreting the moral ideas of Christ to have our attention

⁵ Op. cit., p. 131.

⁶ Schweitzer, op. cit., pp. 396, 356.

always fixed on his apocalyptic ideas.”⁷ May not the converse of this proposition also be true, and may not the influence of the apocalyptic ideas be fairly estimated by reconsidering the ethics of the Gospels? Instead of applying the key of eschatology to New Testament ethics, may not New Testament ethics be applied as a key to its eschatology? What view of human conduct is likely to be held by one whose absorbing concern is for a supernatural and apocalyptic change, in which the fashion of this world would soon pass away? This inquiry is, at least, one which deals with the most unquestionable of the historical data. Whatever else may have been the purpose of Jesus, he was certainly a preacher of righteousness, and whatever else in his message may have been misinterpreted, his hearers were not likely to forget or to pervert his moral instruction. “The ethical note,” wrote no less radical a critic than Baur, “is the purest and most unmistakable element in the teaching of Jesus, and the essential core of Christianity.”⁸ “The ethical ideas of Jesus,” Professor Hermann has said, “are incontestably the essential element in the spiritual experience of the modern world.”⁹ May it not then be reasonable to estimate the force of the eschatological anticipation by its effect upon this ethical note? If the controlling interest of the teacher was habitually and consistently detached from present cares, what would his ethics be? Obviously they would express with consistency and continuity this abnormal, anticipatory, waiting habit of mind. The ethics of the Gospels would give us a teaching, not designed for this world, but preparatory for another; an ‘interim-ethics,’ appropriate for those who looked for some great catastrophe, but not to be taken seriously by those who have waked from the apocalyptic dream. The best way of conduct on the approach of an earthquake is not the best rule of conduct in a stable world. “Can any moralist,” it has been asked, “firmly persuaded of the imminent dissolution of the world and all things in it, frame an ethical code adequate for all time?”¹⁰ The answer to this question is in the unwavering dictum of Schweitzer:

⁷ Garrod, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

⁸ *Christentum der ersten drei Jahrhunderte*, 1860, p. 35.

⁹ *Die sittlichen Weisungen Jesu*, 1904, p. 12.

¹⁰ Garrod, *op. cit.*, pp. 60, 61.

"It is altogether false to affirm, with modern theology, that service is the new ethics of the kingdom. There is, to Jesus, no ethics of the kingdom; for in the kingdom all natural conditions, even differences of sex¹¹ are to disappear. Temptation and sin will no more exist. . . . Service, humility, temptation, willingness to die, even penitence, belong to an interim-ethics."¹²

When, however, we turn with this problem to the Gospels themselves, and set side by side with each other the eschatological dream and the ethical teaching, it seems not too much to say that at many points they do not match. The practical instructions of Jesus for the conduct of life do not easily fit in as a whole with the plot of the apocalyptic drama. Many passages there undoubtedly are which touch the anticipatory and millennial note, and some which strike that note firmly and unmistakably. If one fixes his attention on single passages, or on a single group of passages, he may easily conclude, with Tolstoi, that the essence of the Gospel is in the single virtue of non-resistance, or, with Schweitzer, that it is in the single idea of eschatology. When, however, we recall the prevailing tone of ethical teaching, and still more the habitual attitude of the Teacher toward the world in which he found himself, it is difficult to see in it a predominating quality of indifference to the world's affairs or of complete preoccupation with a supernatural catastrophe. On the contrary, the ethics of Jesus exhibit on the whole a sanity, universality, and applicability which are independent of abnormal circumstances, and free from emotional strain. There is nothing apocalyptic in the parable of the Good Samaritan, or in the appropriation by Jesus of the two great commandments, or in the prayer for to-day's bread and the forgiveness of trespasses, or in the praise of peace-making and purity of heart. Yet in these, and not in the mysterious prophecies of an approaching desolation, the conscience of the world has found its counsellor and guide. The apocalyptic anticipations find their parallels in much of the contemporary literature, but the ethical sagacity and sufficiency are original and unique. The same genuine concern for the existing world is indicated even in the teaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God. Here, no doubt, his message is often colored by the sunset-splendor of the End

¹¹ Mark 10 25 26.

¹² Op. cit., p. 362.

of the Age; but it is not less often set in the prosaic light of common day. The kingdom is prepared, not for those only who have dismissed from concern the obligations of daily life and have fixed their eyes on a supernatural future, but for those who, in the world as it is, feed the hungry and clothe the naked and visit those who are sick or in prison. Whatever millennial promises may be comprehended in the message of the kingdom, the teaching of Jesus seems quite as often a warning against excessive contemplation of a supernatural consummation and a recall to the humble service of the existing world.

Still more corrective of a thoroughgoing eschatology is the habitual attitude of Jesus toward both nature and life. He looks on both, not with the eye of an ascetic or visionary, as though they stood between him and his supreme desire, but with a keen and undisguised appreciation and delight. Each phase of nature, springtime and harvest, the lilies and the birds, the mountain and the lake, each household task, the working of the leaven and the sweeping of the room—is to him beautiful and sacred; not as of a world that is passing away, but as of a world that is divinely given and spiritually symbolic. Human life also, its joys and sorrows, the children at their play, and the laborer at his work—these are not viewed with the pensive indifference of one whose heart is elsewhere, but with a keen sympathy and alert responsiveness which have suggested to many critics a Hellenic quality in Jesus, and have induced at least one writer to claim for him even a Hellenic descent.¹³

In short the ethical data of the Gospels appear to provide a test which is likely to modify or limit an extreme application of eschatology to their interpretation. If, as Bousset has remarked, the Gospels offer a religion of 'ethical liberation'¹⁴ it may be reasonable to conclude with him that "though steeped in the eschatological hopes of his time and country [Jesus] yet succeeded in altering and purifying them at the critical point, and in breaking through the limits which hemmed them in." The drama dimly discerned in the Gospels may thus be interpreted by the conduct

¹³H. S. Chamberlain, *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, I, 219 ff.

¹⁴Jesus (Trevelyan, 1906), pp. 162, 85.

habitually commended in the Gospels. Either we must conclude that while the mind of the Master was fixed on the future he scattered along his way, as a by-product of that teaching, his universal ethics, or else we must conclude that however real to his thought, as to that of his contemporaries, the Messianic expectation may have been, it did not dominate his teaching or his character, and that in his most characteristic instructions he rose above the anticipations of his time into the presence of timeless ideals. In short, this historical problem has to consider whether the secret of Jesus lay in his reflection of contemporary ideals or in his creation of new ideals; whether the apocalyptic expectation was his master or whether it was his servant; whether he reiterated the current eschatology or utilized and spiritualized it; whether in a word the central motive of his teaching was dramatic or didactic, the work of a herald or the work of a teacher; whether his place in history is to be found within the circle of contemporary thought, or whether he stood above the heads of his reporters. The conclusion which Wellhausen, not without impatience, but with eloquence and authority, announces, may provide a sufficient answer to these questions. "It is held," he remarks, "that the announcement of a future kingdom is the central element in the message. And yet, in Mark's Gospel, this element is completely in the background. Jesus, in his Galilean period, is not a herald but a teacher; and a teacher, it may be added, not of the Kingdom of God, but of the various subjects which, in natural succession, are thrown in his way,—of obvious truths applied to the needs of people misled by their spiritual guides. . . . The eschatological hope first reached its intense significance through the earliest disciples, who attached it to the person of Jesus. . . . His own way of life was not like that of his followers, determined by eschatology. They renounced the world to prepare for his coming; but his ethics were assuredly not, as uninformed persons have recklessly asserted, provisional ethics, to be endured only through the expectation of an approaching end, and beyond that point superfluous. His ethics were the eternal will of God, in heaven as on earth. He was, no doubt, deeply affected by faith in the future, in the general resurrection, the judgment, and the Kingdom of God. All this he could assume

as accepted by his hearers and needing little exhortation. . . . (Yet) it is the non-Jewish and human, rather than the Jewish in him, which stamps his character."¹⁵

Such are some brief suggestions of a corrective influence on New Testament eschatology which may proceed from New Testament ethics. The eschatological problem, it has been truthfully said, is just now 'in the air.'¹⁶ It may be the task of ethical inquiry to give to this airy structure of criticism a substantial underpinning on the ground. And this, it may be lastly pointed out, is not only an order of procedure which is applicable to New Testament criticism, but one which reflects an order of teaching which seems to have been the way of Jesus himself. Not, first, a conviction concerning his place in the plan of the Eternal and a full understanding of his mission; but, first, loyalty, obedience, moral susceptibility—such seems to have been his education to discipleship. "Follow me," he says, "Take up thy cross and follow"; and along the way of service you may reach the end of truth. Obedience, as Robertson taught, was to Jesus the organ of spiritual vision. Whatever dramatic elements there are included in the message of the Gospels may be best disclosed through its didactic elements. The first appeal of Jesus Christ was not to the reason or the imagination, but to the will. Character to him was the path to insight. The pure in heart should see God. Perhaps the guidance of New Testament criticism to a stable conclusion may be in the same manner committed to Christian ethics, and the metaphysics of the Gospels may be approached through the appreciation of their characteristic morality. Perhaps it may still happen that those who will to do the will are on the way to know the doctrine.

¹⁵ *Einleitung in die drei ersten Evangelien*, 1905, pp. 106, 113, 114.

¹⁶ Sanday, *op. cit.*, p. 65.